

# Resource or Resort? - New Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of A University Library In Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

In an age when libraries have been transformed into curators of knowledge and societal values today's libraries are a target from patrons for improved service. This research examined the nature of new university undergraduate students' perceptions on library use since perceptions are a source of learning needs. Structured open-ended questionnaires were employed to collect data on the participants' perceptions of the library, types of products expected, and user behaviour and for determining learning needs. The methodology was a qualitative paradigm in the form of a survey. The questionnaires were administered on a random sample of thirty-two (32) new undergraduate students at a conveniently selected University in Zimbabwe. The data were collected before the students had attended the university's formal induction training programme so as to minimize environmental influences such as interactions with members of the university community and with the physical university library. In this way, both validity and reliability of the research results were increased. The data collected were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The major findings revealed that 94% of the students perceived the library as an education resource and 84.37% planned to use the library intensively at a minimum of 5 h a week. The findings further revealed a disjuncture in that despite the high value rating of the library as an education resource (94%) and the planned high rate usage of the library and its electronic products, 78.13% lacked functional information communication technology (ICT) skills for conducting key operations such as electronic book searches, online public accessing cataloguing and for verification of sources. The findings serve to inform library management about students' perceived ICT training needs that could be addressed in future induction training programmes to facilitate new students' effective use the library as an education resource and not as an education resort.

**Key Words:** Library, Perceptions, Undergraduate Students, Induction, Learning Needs, Information Communication and Technology.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the digital age, numerous authors, and even artists have given thought to what the future of the library will bring to society. As books evolve into and from the digital world, they are becoming ever more

ubiquitous, where more users are able to grasp more information quickly leading many people to assume that since information is becoming decentralized through virtual libraries, alarm bells are ringing loudly signaling

the demise of libraries as repositories of books. A virtual library is an organized set of links to items (documents, software and images) databases on the network (Tamilselvan and Sivakumar, 2012). The term can also refer to a library that exists without any regard to physical space whose purpose is to enable users of a site to find information that exists elsewhere on the network. Lehman (2012) argues that libraries and librarians are in ever increasing demand because with all the information available everywhere, there will be a greater need for 'sense making' abilities in order to decipher and translate information.

This means that with proper library use, knowledge and ICT skill, patrons such as students, are able to make information more relevant, understandable and usable (Lehman, 2012). Similarly, the students' ability to conduct essential activities such as book searches, online public cataloguing and verification of sources, in this new treasure trove of data, is bound to contribute immensely to positive academic outcomes.

Libraries have played an important role in society and in democratizing access to information. Morris (2012) points out that more than just books and banks of computers, libraries are still places where individuals gather to explore, interact and imagine. Libraries build citizens. They educate individuals and foster thoughtful communities. In the USA, the public library was established to safeguard democracy. In many other regions and countries they are symbols of important social changes. The public library like the church and the school is part of the local landscape (Madden, 1979). Perceptions vary from person to person depending on their cultural background and needs and they are accepted as a person's immediate reality (Gregory, 1997), on which to build the future.

This study focused on the university's undergraduates' perceptions of the role of the library in order to understand how students would associate with the university library including their own limitations to making those interactions. After all, in the broad realm of education, management has a role of assisting new students to navigate the library efficiently. According to Putman (2009), libraries are places where people come to know themselves and their communities. He goes on to say that people may go to the library looking mainly for information but they find each other there. New mothers connect at baby story times, elderly people often facing difficult life transition attend library events and find that they make new friends, teenagers meet up in library's teen spaces after school and readers discuss current events in the periodicals room.

## **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF A SELECTED UNIVERSITY LIBRARY**

A library is a beacon of the core values and activities of

academic life (Kur and Gonyea, 2003) since learning, teaching and researching evolve round it. University libraries in Zimbabwe develop from humble beginnings that are characterized by meager resources. For example, the Great Zimbabwe University library was established in the year 2000 with an initial collection of 481 volumes. The collection has since grown to 17500 volumes and a subscription to over 10000 electronic journals as at October 2013. Due to the demand for library services at its different campuses, the library has since opened two branches at two different campuses. More branch libraries are expected to be opened as the university grows. Most libraries offer information both in print form and in soft copy form through a subscription to electronic resources thereby placing demands on the students to possess requisite ICT competences. It has become a tradition to run a brisk induction as follows:

### **Key Features of a University Library's Induction Training Programme**

Universities in Zimbabwe run library induction training programmes for all new students where library induction trainers make presentations. It is at these presentations where new students are expected to learn how the library operates and the rules and regulations governing the library are explained. The students then embark on a tour of the library where they then register with the library. Before the induction comes to an end, the students are given an opportunity to ask questions on any issues they would not have understood. Hardly do they ask questions because in the African culture, it is unsound to ask questions to persons one is unfamiliar with. It is this glorious gap created by this silence and naivety that the researchers pounced on and decided to probe the new undergraduate students using questionnaires that were privately answered.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

What are the new undergraduates' conceptions of a library?

What is the new undergraduate participants' perceived value of a campus library?

How do the students intend to utilise the library?

What are the undergraduate students' perceived library-use learning needs?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of the study on new undergraduates' perceptions of a university library is primarily four-fold. First, it leads to an understanding of how libraries are perceived by the new undergraduates so that

management can predict students' behaviour. Secondly, it informs management of user learning needs for planning purposes. Thirdly, librarians and induction trainers may align induction training programmes with the identified library-user needs. Fourthly, the learning needs will provide the evaluation criteria for adjudicating on the effectiveness of induction training programmes. In addition, the research findings will open the door for more research on library use at universities.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Literature reveals that learners' perceptions emanate from previous experiences and these perceptions have a profound influence on students' behaviour in a learning environment (Choy and Cheah, 2009). Hence, new students bring with them perceptions of the library to the university which are yet to be identified and understood before they can be met and even changed to align with new reality. As such, the need to understand and develop formerly techno-illiterate students into techno-savvy library patrons remains a challenge for both university management and students in Zimbabwe. The study sought to identify and understand the perceptions of new Faculty of Education undergraduate students about the library. It was anticipated that the findings would have profound implications on obligations of universities to orientate new students on library use based on the identified needs for improved academic outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Concept of Perception

Multiple synonyms of the verb to 'perceive' exist such as to 'discern, to apprehend, to note, to sense'. The common thread in these words is that the act of perceiving is a psychological process. It is an act of the mind to see and understand the world (Russell in Olson, 2011). A person only perceives what he or she is aware of such as perceiving an object like a library, a situation or a programme. DeCecco in Muyengwa (2012) explains that after perceiving a person then forms appropriate concepts based on one's experiences. For example, a new undergraduate student's previous experience of a library enables the student's mind to discern and interpret a university library as either an educational resource or not. In their contribution to this debate on the importance of perceptions in learning, Darley et al. (1981), state that perceptions are educated guesses which provide the lens through which educators and administrators can gainfully and less painstakingly understand the behaviour of learners in the real world. In support, Russell in Olson (2011) posits that if one can understand how the world is

perceived and experienced by another person, then one can predict that person's behaviour. By implication, armed with students' perceptions, management can prepare and meet students' expectations on library products and services. Muyengwa (2012) further agrees that one's previous experiences influence one's perceptions. Consequently, in this study, the experiences of the students at high school would have a profound impact on their perceptions of the quality of library products and service that a university should offer. Admittedly, usage of the library's technology would depend on the students' level of skill.

### Significance of Library- Use Skills

New students at tertiary institutions have difficulties because they lack the skills of organised intellectual activity (Stoica, 1977). Limited literature on Zimbabwe claims that pre-university education does not pay great attention to training in literature search and the use of information sources. As such, school libraries are generally regarded as active lending units for didactic literature, instead of being mobilising and stimulating nuclei or study laboratories. Few teachers have made collaboration with the school library as an applied pedagogical method. In the end, students find it difficult to meet the demands of an academic life that assigns a paramount role to independent study (ibid). These students would have lacked contact with mountains of knowledge which will result in them having difficulties in using the university library since their investigative skills would have been limited to searching dictionaries or small sized alphabetic catalogues.

These deficiencies are bound to have a serious impact on the student's academic life and journey. Allen (1970) points out that the library must play a focal part in the teaching and learning process. It is in this education resource that the student should gain not only knowledge of facts, but an experience of diverse opinions basing on exquisite skills of information gathering and evaluation. The highest aim of the library is its contact with students in class, as individuals and in groups for specific instruction throughout their studies so as to stimulate them to make independent searches for knowledge and to guide them to use the available resources and technology (ibid). With the emergence of new technologies and widespread internet in Zimbabwe, most students entering university nowadays think that they are techno-savvy and that they do not need a librarian to show them how to navigate and evaluate the information that is available on the internet. To them, as long as they can search for information there is no harm in using that information without verifying its origin.

This has resulted in students producing substandard work because they would have used unreliable sources

**Table 1.** Gender of participants.

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	19	59.37
Male	13	40.63
Total	32	100

whose origin and specialisation in the fields being cited cannot be independently verified. On a similar note, Anyangwe (2012) observes that today's undergraduate recruits are very confident with technology but they are not really savvy at using the information that is out there well. She argues that students think that if they can google something and get 100 000 results, that is brilliant, whereas academic research requires something different of them. For example, she goes on to say that when an 18 year old is advised not to use Wikipedia in an academic essay, the student looks at you in shock and horror unbeknown that Wikipedia warns users to be aware that not all of its articles are of encyclopaedic quality. Wikipedia may contain false or debatable information (Moran, 2011). This situation highlights the existence of learning needs amongst undergraduate students, such as at determining and accessing reliable academic data.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design which employed a survey method was used to gather data for this paper. Structured questionnaires with both closed and open-ended questions were administered on a randomly selected sample of 32 students from a conveniently targeted institution,.

### Sample Selection

The study sample was selected from a large population of new students in the Faculty of Education. A systematic random sampling procedure which consisted of each fifth student from a list of 151 new undergraduates was employed to extract a sample of 32 participants, being a sample size that many researchers consider to be sufficient for statistical analyses to be (Cohen et al., 2011). This sample size was considered to be a large enough sample that would give the researchers the confidence to generalize research findings.

## DATA COLLECTION

### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place on the opening day of the semester as the newly enrolled undergraduates keenly

awaited the university's traditional induction training. The data collection process coincided with the induction training process and as such acted as a pre-induction training exercise. Faced with a population of 151 students, structured questionnaires were handed to every fifth student as the new students entered the auditorium thereby resulting in the systematic selection of a representative sample of 32 participants. The data gathering was timed to minimise bias from external influences such as from interactions of the new students with older students, administrators and induction trainers. Accordingly, the self administered questionnaires were completed in the presence of the researchers. In so doing both reliability and validity of the data were bound to be guaranteed.

### Data Analysis

The data that were collected were subjected to open coding in order to capture the perceptions and voices of the participants, (Leedy and Ormond, 2005). The data were then examined for special attributes before being organised into sub themes and quantified into number [N] and their respective [%] and presented in tables. The sub- themes represented the various ways in which participants perceived the library before they had attended the university's library induction training course. A thematic approach was adopted for data presentation and analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study were presented and discussed in the following manner: Demographic data were presented and discussed first in order to provide an insight into the attributes of the participants. Then selected sub-themes were determined which included; participants' conceptions of a library, perceptions of the participants on use and value of a library (resource or resort), perceived quality of products and services and participants' perceived learning needs.

### Participants' Personal Attributes

The study sample consisted of 19 females (59.37%) while the males numbered 13 (40.63%). This indicates an almost evenly balanced gender distribution in the research (Table 1).

**Table 2.** Age groups.

Age group in years	Frequency	Percentage
Up to 20	5	15.62
21-30	9	28.13
31-40	12	37.50
Above 40	6	18.75
Total	32	100.00

**Table 3.** Participants' perceptions of a library.

Perception of a library	Frequency	Percentage
Physical Institution housing books	19	59.37
Place for research, study, meeting	13	40.63
Total	32	100.00

### Participants' Age

Eighteen (18) participants were in the above 31 years category. This group comprised mature participants whose responses helped to increase both the reliability and validity of the responses based on the notion that mature learners have valid experience that they would like to share (Rogers and Horrocks, 2010),(Table 2).

### Participants' Conceptions of a Library

#### **Question: What do you understand a library to be?**

Participants were asked to define a library based on their high school encounters of libraries since it is mandatory for all high schools in Zimbabwe to provide a library. There was uniformity in the conceptions of a library. Nineteen (19) participants, (59.37%) defined a library as an institution which housed books and other forms of reading materials such as journals while 13 participants (40.63%) perceived it as a facility for sourcing information not only from books but from the internet as well. The significance of the conception is that all the participants conceived a library as a source of information as pointed out by Allen (1970), that students should search for knowledge in libraries independently.

A further analysis of the dominant conception of a library as a 'house of books' gives credence to Madden's (1979) assertion that previous experience influenced one's perception of an object since most high schools in Zimbabwe are yet to develop students' computer literacy which will subsequently lead to internet book search competence. In support, Anyangwe (2012), contends that management and library users in some institutions view a library merely as a supermarket where picking books from neat shelves goes on smoothly. Similarly the majority of the undergraduates in the study perceived a library to be a repository of books meaning that they considered it to be a central book holding place where

books are stored and issued out; contrary to the view that libraries are more than just collections of books but are also places where individuals gather to explore, interact and imagine (Morris 2012) (Table 3).

### **PATICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF A LIBRARY**

#### **Library as an Educational Resource or Resort?**

The study then sought to establish whether or not the new undergraduates perceived the university's library as important or not in their studies and why. The findings were that despite the coming of age of internet services in Zimbabwe, personal computers and modern mobile phones and iPods, the majority of participants (94%) still felt that libraries were still important in their education journeys, 3% thought that libraries were no longer needed, and another 3% were neutral. Clearly none considered a library to be a place for leisure (resort). Some of the reasons in support of the overwhelming view that the library was an education resource were in the following vignettes: 'the library is a good source of books and other reading materials; 'We rely on books for information since we do not have personal laptops for accessing the internet; 'The library is a source of reliable information; 'We need the library's electronic services because we cannot afford expensive internet bundles for accessing data.' According to Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) (2013), internet prices are high and unaffordable for many Zimbabweans.

Zimbabwe relies heavily on imported hardware and software and has not developed local industries to lessen its technological dependency and costs. In addition, the library provides a vital social service by helping bridge the gap between the haves and the have nots especially when it comes to literacy and computer skills training (libraryre-essentials.com). Libraries offer services and

**Table 4.** Planned frequency of library use in hours per week.

Frequency in hours per week	Number of participants	Percentage of total
Up to 5	5	15.63
6-10	10	31.25
11-15	9	28.12
Over 16	8	25.00
Total	32	100.00

**Table 5.** Participants' planned library activities.

Main purpose of library visit	Number of participants	Percentage
Academic reading of books	19	59.38
Academic internet surfing	8	25.00
Leisure	3	9.37
Other	2	6.25
Total	32	100.00

products that level the intellectual playing field. This means that libraries provide people of any income level or background access to high quality information and to the use of library computers in addition to borrowing print educational materials. Under such circumstances, students can benefit both educationally and economically. A library needs to play a significant role in learning and teaching at university (Allen, 1970). This vital aspect is also confirmed, in a research conducted by Rainie (2003), in which 99% of participants considered a library to be a valuable asset in their community. When a library is viewed likewise, it becomes an integral part of education (Mahajan, 2005). At best, it must be well resourced with up to date sources of information and modern technology which the patrons can navigate easily.

#### **PREDICTING PARTICIPANTS' FUTURE BEHAVIOURS ON USE OF THE LIBRARY**

##### **Question: How Many Hours Do You Intend To Spend In The Library Per Week?**

The findings as shown in Table 4 indicated that 5 participants (15.63%) planned to spend a maximum of 5 h per week in the library; 10 participants (31.25%) up to 10 h while 9 (28.12) participants planned to spend between 11 and 15 h a week. There were 8 participants (25%) who indicated that they planned to spend at least 16 h a week in the library. A combined total of 17 participants (53.12%) were to spend a minimum of 11 h in the library per week. These data indicated a strong desire and intention to use the library thereby alerting institutions to prepare their students for effective library use. The next aspect for the research was on how the

participants intended to use the library and the findings are presented and discussed below.

#### **PARTICIPANTS' MAJOR ACTIVITIES IN THE LIBRARY**

Having been asked to state the priority of their intended visit to the university library, 19 (59.38%) mentioned reading academic books followed by internet surfing (25.00%). Reading for leisure was third (9.37%) and other purposes which were written down as social chatting and resting were the least to be pursued (6.25%). It is important to note the high level of planned use of the library for academic work among the participants when compared to the developed world where a sizeable number of patrons would spend time watching a movie or reading a newspaper (Miller et al., 2012).

#### **PARTICIPANTS' SELF-ASSESSMENT OF LEVEL OF LIBRARY-USE SKILLS AS TRAINING NEEDS INDICATORS**

Data that were collected from a self- assessment section of the questionnaire on level of competence on selected key skills that were important for effective navigation of library technologies were categorised in Table 5. The data in Table 5 revealed that the majority of the participants possessed low level basic computer literacy skills (25 participants, 78.13%). This is further supported by statistical revelations that as many as 28 (87.5%) of the participants rated their open- line public access cataloguing (OPAC) skills as being poor thereby limiting them to manual book searches in this era where most library products are now accessed through computer technology. Thirty participants (93.75%), lacked skills for

**Table 6.** Self-assessment of level of library-use skills.

Skill area	Poor F	Average F	Good F	Total
Basic computer use	25	4	3	32
Open-line public access cataloguing	30	0	2	32
Manual library book search	10	6	16	32
Electronic book search	24	4	4	32
Verification of internet information sources	30	2	0	32

distinguishing credible internet sources from less credible ones bearing in mind that less credible sources are not of encyclopaedic quality (Anyangwe, 2012). Overall, a wide gap of computer knowledge and skills was identified among the research participants (Table 6).

## CONCLUSION

This study revealed that ninety-four (94%) of the participants, which is almost all of the new university students in the research held perceptions of a library as an education resource. However, as many as 78.13% of the participants lacked essential computer related library use skills to facilitate full utilisation of a modern education resource towards the speedy achievement of treasured academic dreams. The research concludes that in as much as new university students revere a library in their midst, good ICT skills are key to accessing information. Management at universities should invest in the development of new students' ICT literacy skills. The existing universities' library induction training programmes should respond to patrons' identified training needs such as the need for conducting electronic book searches, online public access cataloguing and accurate verification of sources. The research opens doors for other researches that are intent on understanding and addressing issues of students' ICT skills for library usage.

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